

DEVELOPMENT STUDIES RESEARCH GROUP

Working Papers

MAY DAY REPORT (1986)

by

Yusuf S. Bhamjee

Yunus Carrim

Matthew Francis

Mpumelele J. Sikhosana

DSRG WORKING PAPER NO. 13

**University of Natal
Pietermaritzburg
Department of Economics**

DEVELOPMENT STUDIES RESEARCH GROUP
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS
UNIVERSITY OF NATAL, PIETERMARITZBURG

MAY DAY REPORT (1986)

by

Yusuf S. Bhamjee

Yunus Carrim

Matthew Francis

Mpumelelo J. Sikhosana

DSRG WORKING PAPER NO. 13

AUGUST 1986

ISBN 0 869 80 544 4

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The DSRG staff wishes to acknowledge the contributions made by the following people, without whom this report would not have been possible:

1. Mark Bastew
2. Malcolm Draper
3. Shelley Easton
4. Brenda Grant
5. Vaughn John
6. Wendy Leeb
7. Annie McDonald
8. Jabulani Mkhize
9. Makhatini Mqansa
10. Dumisa Mtshali
11. Lali Ntshangase
12. Sanjaya Pillay
13. Muriel Vilakazi
14. Mandla Xaba
15. Vusi Xaba
16. Monde Yanta

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	1
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MAY DAY	2
EXTENT OF WORKER STAYAWAY	5
ATTITUDES OF MANAGEMENT TO THE STAYAWAY	6
UNION AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATION INVOLVEMENT	7
AFRICAN TOWNSHIPS	9
INDIAN AND COLOURED AREAS	11
SCHOOLS	13
COSATU RALLY	13
CONCLUSION	18

MAY DAY 1986 in PIETERMARITZBURG

INTRODUCTION.

As part of the national Labour Monitoring Group (LMG), the Development Studies Research Group (DSRG), based in the Economics Department of the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg, monitored the events of May Day in Pietermaritzburg. The main aim was to assess the extent of the worker stayaway and to monitor generally the way that May Day was observed in Pietermaritzburg.

It was a particularly important May Day celebration as the Inkatha backed United Workers Union of South Africa (UWUSA), was being launched at a rally at Kings Park in Durban. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), on the other hand, had organised several regional rallies, including one in Pietermaritzburg. Would a significant number of workers from Pietermaritzburg go to the UWUSA rally? By what means would they get there? How many workers would go to the COSATU rally? The DSRG hoped to monitor what happened.

Among other issues, it was decided to enquire into the involvement of trade union and community organisations in the organisation of the stayaway; the attitude of management to the stayaway; the extent of the boycott of schools; and the nature of the speeches made at the COSATU rally.

The monitoring team comprised three full-time researchers at the DSRG, a lecturer and sixteen students. A meeting of the group was held before May Day to establish guidelines to ensure the effective and objective monitoring of events.

There were three formal surveys conducted by means of a questionnaire. A survey was undertaken of union and community organisations to establish the extent and nature of their

involvement in the observation of May Day. The second survey was conducted with management representatives to establish the extent of the worker stayaway. A third survey was undertaken of schools to establish the extent of the boycott by pupils. The latter two surveys were conducted by telephone on May Day.

Students were stationed in various townships to monitor events. The African areas monitored were Edendale, Imbali, Ashdown and Sobantu. The Coloured areas of Woodlands and Eastwood were monitored. The Indian areas monitored were Northdale, Newholmes, Raisethorpe, Allandale and the Indian area of the city.

Informal interviews were conducted with bus and taxi drivers to assess the flow of passengers to work.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MAY DAY.

May day is observed as workers day. In many countries in the capitalist world and in almost all socialist countries it is a public holiday.

It has a somewhat different meaning in different contexts - but in general it is a day on which recognition is given to the importance of labour in society. It is a day when workers come together to celebrate their unity and re-dedicate themselves to the workers cause - for better wages and working conditions, and for a greater say in society.

Its origins can be traced to the 1856 strike of Australian workers in support of an eight hour working day. In those days people worked up to an eighteen hour day for six days a week. The demands of the Australian workers were subsequently taken up by American workers, who organised a general strike on 1 May, 1886. There were violent clashes between the police and workers. Over

200 workers were killed, but the workers won their demand for an eight hour working day - and ever since then May Day has come to be celebrated internationally as "The Day of the Worker".

In South Africa May Day was first celebrated in 1904 by White workers. With the growth of trade unionism among African workers, May Day also came to be celebrated by African workers. Black and White workers usually organised separate May Day rallies, but there were times when some White workers came together with Black workers to observe May Day jointly. In some industries workers negotiated for time off work to observe May Day.

May Day was often used by unions and political organisations in the Black community to draw attention to the wider political struggle against White minority rule in South Africa.

May Day was celebrated regularly until the collapse of trade unionism among African workers following the repression in the early sixties. For White workers on the other hand, May Day lost its meaning as they became increasingly conservative.

With the resurgence of trade union activity amongst African workers since the early seventies and with their growing strength and sophistication in the eighties, May Day has once again been placed on the agenda. Since 1983 unions have begun to observe May Day again and since last year they have been increasingly assertive in demanding that May Day be a paid public holiday.

This year is the hundredth Anniversary of May Day, and unions throughout the country have made representations to management for the day off. COSATU, the largest trade union federation, has called for the observation of May Day around the following demands:

1. THE RIGHT TO WORK

- * May Day as a paid public holiday.
- * 40 hour week and a living wage for all.
- * Social security, increased UIF and rent exemption for all unemployed.
- * Equal and living pensions for all people on a monthly basis.
- * Full maternity benefits for working women.

2. THE RIGHT TO ORGANISE

- * The right of all workers to belong to democratic trade unions irrespective of their industry or location.
- * The right to strike.

3. THE RIGHTS OF STUDENTS

- * To support fully the demands by students to form democratic SRC's and build an alternative system of people's education now.

4. THE RIGHT TO FREE POLITICAL ACTIVITY

- * Unbanning of all banned organisations.
- * Release of all political prisoners.
- * Dropping of all treason charges.

5. THE RIGHT TO FREE MOVEMENT AND DECENT HOUSING

- * Immediate end to pass laws, influx control and all laws that control the lives of people.
- * Rents that people can pay.

EXTENT OF WORKER STAYAWAY

The management survey was used to measure the extent of the stayaway from work in the manufacturing and commercial sectors of Pietermaritzburg. The LMG provided a sample of 19 firms for Pietermaritzburg. This represented 12% of the LMG Natal sample drawn by the Market Bureau of Africa. The sample contained only companies which employed 100 or more workers.

The DSRG decided to supplement the sample with a further 26 firms. Among the reasons for doing so were, inter alia, the following:

- i) The LMG sample concentrated on manufacturing concerns only.
- ii) Of the 19 firms in the sample, only 12 were directly traceable.
- iii) The sample was too small to arrive at reliable enough findings.
- iv) The majority of firms in Pietermaritzburg employ less than 100 workers.

The 26 additional firms were selected on the principle of random sampling (generated via computer) from the membership lists of the Chambers of Industry and Commerce. The final stratified sample comprised 38 firms. All the firms were contacted by phone and no refusals were recorded.

The salient findings were:

1. The 38 concerns interviewed employed 5120 workers which accounted for 18% of the total workforce employed in both the manufacturing and commercial sectors.

2. Of the 5120 workers, 2702 stayed away i.e. 53% of the workers included in the sample. The racial composition of the workforce who stayed away is as follows: Africans - 68%; Indians

- 43%; Coloureds - 37%; and Whites - 2%.

3. 74% of the concerns contacted were affected by the stayaway. An analysis of the concerns affected reveal that 79% of the manufacturing sector and 60% of the commercial sector experienced stayaways.

ATTITUDES OF MANAGEMENT TO THE STAYAWAY

The management survey was also used to assess the attitudes of management to the stayaway. It was established that:

1. The management of half of the firms contacted had entered into an agreement with workers. The nature of the agreement was as follows:

+ Unpaid leave -	21%
+ Workers would compensate company with an alternative day -	21%
+ Loss of pay -	42%
+ Paid holiday -	16%

2. This means that 84% of the workers had, in one way or another, been subjected to the "no work, no pay" policy. Only one firm indicated that workers would lose their jobs. However, this firm was not affected by the stayaway.

3. 25% of the firms agreed that workers have a right to May Day as a public holiday. 36% did not agree. The remaining 39% were non-committal.

4. When asked if they were prepared to exchange another public holiday for May Day the response was:

Unqualified yes -	42%
Yes, provided the government declared May Day	

a holiday -	46%
Should be an additional holiday -	6%
No, without any qualifications -	6%

In other words, 88% of the firms were prepared to exchange another public holiday for May Day.

5. Of those firms prepared to exchange another public holiday for May Day, 53% were in favour of doing away with Kruger Day or the Day of the Covenant. A further 20% mentioned another public holiday. The remaining 27% did not name any specific holiday.

UNION AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATION INVOLVEMENT.

All the COSATU affiliates in Pietermaritzburg - Metal and Allied Workers Union; Sweet, Food and Allied Workers Union; Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa; Paper, Wood and Allied Workers Union and Transport and General Workers Union - were interviewed. An interview was conducted with a representative of the other trade union federation in Pietermaritzburg, the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), who spoke on behalf of all its affiliates. Representatives of the United Democratic Front (UDF), Forward Youth and the African People's Democratic Union of Southern Africa (APDUSA) were also interviewed.

All the unions had approached management to give the workers the day off. According to union officials, three firms had granted a paid holiday. The general attitude of management was "no work, no pay".

The unions varied in the extent to which they had organised workers to observe May Day. Some of the COSATU unions had begun as early as January to raise the issue of May Day on the shop-floor. Other unions within COSATU had begun to do so only a few days before May Day. However, all of them were confident that the workers would stay away from work in large numbers.

COSATU and CUSA organised separate rallies. While the CUSA rally was organised by the federation itself, the COSATU rally was organised by a May Day committee comprising three COSATU and three UDF representatives. Forward Youth, which defines itself as an independent, non-sectarian youth organisation in support of working class struggle, also sought representation on this committee but was unsuccessful.

UDF members were very active in the organisation of the May Day rally. In consultation with COSATU, they attended to many of the logistical aspects of the event - such as arranging the venue, the loud-speaker system, the banners, the legal and medical services, the marshals, and so on.

APDUSA did not take part in any May Day events. While it recognised the significance of May Day, it felt it could not take part as it was not invited to participate on the May Day Committee or to send a message of support to the rally.

The union and community organisations distributed pamphlets and put up posters informing people about the significance of May Day and advertising the rallies. Eight different types of pamphlets (more than 60,000 in number) were distributed in support of the COSATU rally. Five of these were from COSATU and one each from the UDF, Natal Indian Congress (NIC) and Forward Youth. CUSA also circulated a pamphlet. UWUSA distributed one type of pamphlet - in Zulu only.

COSATU and UDF issued a joint press statement calling on people to attend the rally. Forward Youth also issued a statement to this effect.

The NIC distributed pamphlets specifically addressed to Indian workers in most of the Indian working class areas. Some house visits were made, where Indian workers were encouraged to attend the COSATU rally. Similarly, letters were addressed to Indian

businessmen calling on them to close their shops for the day and encourage their workers to attend the COSATU rally.

COSATU and UDF jointly organised sixteen buses to the rally. Ten of these buses brought people from Mpophemeni (the township of Howick where the dismissed Sarmcol workers reside) to the meeting. The remaining six buses made repeated trips to Sobantu, Ashdown, Imbali and other African areas to ferry people to the meeting. Forward Youth organised three buses to the meeting.

AFRICAN TOWNSHIPS

There were no incidents of violence in the African townships on the eve of or during May Day. The heavy police and SADF presence, however, made the atmosphere tense.

The monitors estimated that in Ashdown approximately half the workers stayed away from work. Schools were generally closed. Two buses left for the UWUSA rally under police guard. At least one bus, comprising mainly youth, left for the COSATU rally.

At Edendale monitors reported a significant decrease in the number of commuters. Buses were not available in the early hours of the morning until about 08H00. One monitor reported that some people seemed to be confused, and were milling about in the street not sure whether to go to work or not. All service stations and Indian businesses in the area were closed. However, about 90% of the African shops were open.

Four buses were reported to have left for the UWUSA rally. Since the COSATU rally was in Edendale, the local people walked to the rally. The police and SADF maintained a heavy presence in the area. There were several casspirs positioned at various points in Edendale, and other armoured vehicles were also visible.

At Imbali the general impression of the monitors was that there was a large drop in the number of commuters. Buses and taxis did not operate as normal. Buses were only available from 06H30 instead of the normal 04H00. Schools were generally closed.

Four full buses departed from Imbali to the UWUSA rally. Three of these buses had arrived the previous day. Five bus-loads left for the COSATU rally. Several police vans patrolled the township and one SADF casspir kept a low profile at the entrance of the township.

Sobantu monitors estimated that an overwhelming majority of workers had stayed away from work. Taxis did not operate except for the transportation of hospital workers in the early morning. The buses operated normally but were almost empty. The schools were closed.

On the eve of May Day a meeting was called by the Sobantu Youth Organisation. About 300 people attended. Amongst the speakers were two representatives of COSATU and one from UDF. The audience responded enthusiastically to calls by the speakers to support the COSATU rally.

Four buses left for the COSATU rally. None are reported to have left for the UWUSA rally. Police patrolled the township throughout the day - but all was calm.

INDIAN AND COLOURED AREAS

Taxi drivers in the Indian and Coloured areas reported an overall decrease of 50 to 70% in passenger loads. They said that they had hardly any African passengers, especially the domestic and other workers who usually went to the Indian areas to work. One taxi driver said that he had collected R9.00 between 06H30 and 08H30 instead of the usual R50.00. Another said that he had only about a quarter of his usual load, and a third reported that only 3 out of the usual 15 taxis were operating on his route.



BUS STOPS WERE GENERALLY DESERTED

The taxi drivers pointed out that part of the reduction in passengers represented shoppers who would normally go into the city centre to do their shopping. Several of the drivers said that from the eve of May Day the stayaway was the talking point amongst the passengers. They also said that the workers who did take the taxis on May Day were anxious about going to work.

the buses in the Indian areas seemed to be less full than they usually are - but it was difficult to tell what the actual reduction was. The traffic flow from the Indian areas in the morning appeared to be marginally less - but again it was difficult to tell.



NO BUSINESS DOWNTOWN AS INDIAN SHOPS SHUT DOWN FOR THE DAY.

About 70% of the businesses in the Indian area of the city were closed. Many of the shops that had opened, closed at about midday because of the substantial decline in patronage. Businesses in the Indian areas, however, operated as usual.

Taxi drivers in the coloured areas reported that there was a slight drop in passenger numbers. They said that this was mainly due to the non-appearance of workers who usually work in the coloured suburbs. In Eastwood some of the pupils did not attend school at all whilst others left the school premises before the start of the school day.

SCHOOLS

Most African schools in the Pietermaritzburg area were closed. Only a few of the schools continued and did a normal school day.

It was said that most schools controlled by the Kwa Zulu Education Board were instructed to close for the day so that pupils could attend the vigil rally. The African Teachers Association had also advised its members not to work on lay day.

It is difficult, though, to estimate how many pupils went to their normal schools and how many simply stayed at home.

In the Indian and Coloured areas all the schools appeared to be open, except for Eastwood Senior Secondary School.

COSATU RALLY

The COSATU rally, held at the Opheiah Welly stadium in Johannesburg, was a large and colourful occasion. It drew an estimated 25,000 people.



PART OF THE LARGE CROWD ATTENDING THE COSATU RALLY

Approx 40% of these seemed to be workers, the remainder being, mostly youth. At most, there were about 300 non-Africans, most of whom were white. Females constituted a large proportion of the crowd.



WORKERS IN A JUBILANT MOOD

... T-shirts and badges were on sale. There were banners from COSAFO, UDF and Forward Youth. There was at least one green, black and gold flag of the African National Congress and, for a while, the red hammer-and-sickle flag of the South African Communist Party. A poster on one of the gates read "Welcome to Socialism Now".



The youth were in an euphoric mood, often breaking out in song, usually in praise of the ANC and UDF leaders, and in support of the armed political struggle against the Apartheid system.



A TREAT OF POETRY - EDENDALE YOUTH ORGANISATION

There were eight speakers in all - five from COSATU and three from UDF. The meeting was chaired by Petros Ntombela, the chairperson of the local shop-stewards council. The COSATU speakers were Jay Naidoo (general secretary of COSATU), Chris Dlamini (vice-president of COSATU), Alfred Ndlovu (regional chairperson of COSATU), Phillip Dladla (a spokesperson for the dismissed Sarmcol workers) and Jabu Ndlovu (a local woman shop-steward from COSATU). Billy Nair (UDF National executive member), Earnick Ndlovu (UDF National chairman) and Skhumbuzo MNgwenya (local secretary of the UDF) spoke on behalf of the UDF.

The speakers generally focussed on the significance of May Day, the lack of political rights of Black people, the divisiveness of the formation of UWUSA, and the failure of bosses to provide a living wage for workers. Jabu Ndlovu spoke about the specific problems facing women workers and how the unions were taking up women's issues. Phillip Dladla reviewed the Sarmcol strike and explained how the Sarmcol workers co-operative was functioning. Several of the speakers, particularly those from the unions, stressed that workers wanted a society free from all forms of exploitation.



JAY NAIDOO - GENERAL
SECRETARY OF COSATU
ADDRESSING THE RALLY

Throughout the rally there was a strong SADF and police presence in the Wadley stadium area.



The stadium itself was virtually surrounded by police. The police did not enter the stadium itself. For the most part, the crowd seemed to ignore the police. At the closure of the meeting the police certainly made their presence felt.



fully armed, they completely blocked off the main entrance to the stadium. The crowd was asked to leave through a narrow back exit in order to ensure an orderly departure. There were no incidents of violence.

USA organised its rally in the hall connected to their offices in East Street in the Indian area of town. According to officials, about 500 people, almost all workers, attended the rally.

CONCLUSION

Some of the more salient points that emerge from the report:

1. 55% of the African workforce and 53% of the workforce as a whole in the manufacturing and commercial sectors in Pietermaritzburg stayed away from work on May Day.
2. None of the workers who stayed away would lose their jobs. 54% of them were subjected to a "no work, no pay" policy, with the remaining 16% being given a paid holiday.
3. The management of 33% of the firms in Pietermaritzburg was prepared to exchange another public holiday for May Day.
4. About 70% of the Indian businesses in the city area were shut on May Day.
5. The COSATU rally was remarkably successful. About 10,000 people attended.
6. It was not entirely clear how many people from Pietermaritzburg attended the UWSA rally in Durban. However, the observations of monitors would suggest that not many did so.
7. The UDF and COSATU are closely aligned in Pietermaritzburg.

c. May Day is of significance not just to organised Black workers, but to Black students and a wide cross-section of the black community as well.

In the context of the above findings, it would seem appropriate for unions, community organisations and management to make representations to government to declare May Day a public holiday in exchange for one or the other official holidays.

This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons
Attribution – NonCommercial - NoDerivs 3.0 Licence.

To view a copy of the licence please see:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>